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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 1833  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 1098  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1829  
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SUBJECT: TAJIK KIDS ARE PICKIN' COTTON!

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¶1. Cotton picking season has descended on Tajikistan, and just as in the days of central planning, several reporting districts are already exceeding set targets. According to news reports, Kulob region in Khatlon Oblast has yielded over 21,000 tons of cotton - 26% of the region's annual target. Khatlon province yielded 95,325 tons of cotton by September 13, which is almost 70,000 tons more compared to the same period of last year. "Looks like a banner year for Khatlon province" reported governor Amirsho Miraliyev, who set the task to complete the cotton-picking campaign by October 20. In all, 34,000 cotton pickers will work in the Kulob region, and starting on September 15, "a mass mobilization of all free manpower for the cotton harvest will start," according to a source in the Kulob agriculture department.

¶2. In a mildly embarrassing development to the Tajik government, however, the Ministry of Agriculture has quietly lowered this year's cotton harvest targets by three thousand tons to 547,000 tons of raw cotton, according to an exclusive Asia-Plus report. A ministry representative blamed land users for turning cotton fields into private gardens and housing developments. Local governments generally force farmers to grow cotton on at least 70% of their fields, leading to supply and price distortions, massive land erosion, and long-term farming debts.

¶3. Local media has been aflutter with reports of officials pulling students out of school to pick cotton. In an election-year gambit, President Rahmonov himself decreed in August that students are not to pick cotton this year. Working conditions in the fields are appalling, with paltry wages, and minimal labor and living standards. The president's decree recalled that Tajikistan has commitments as a signatory to international child labor treaties, and declared that educational officials who send students to work in the fields will be punished by law, including potential dismissal from their positions. According to media reports, however, local authorities in Sughd and Khatlon provinces had sent all higher educational institution and senior secondary students to cotton plantations. On September 18, police in Khatlon Oblast actually

detained several journalists as they attempted to film an interview and take photos of students at Qurghon Teppa State University heading off for the cotton campaign.

14. With a large percentage of Tajikistan's male workforce absent as migrant workers in Russia, women and children form the bulk of the cotton-picking workforce. A hukumat (local government) representative in Qhurgon-Teppa sent a letter to the local Indigo cellular phone company office instructing the office to send one person from Indigo for 10 days picking cotton without pay and without provisions. According to some press reports, students are being forced to go to cotton plantations; other reports adamantly stress that students labor by their own free will.

15. In the Rudaki district near Dushanbe on a hot afternoon September 20, EmbOfs found few children working in the fields. Private farmers hire mostly women to pick 20-50 kilograms of cotton a day, paying them \$.03-\$.04 per kilogram (the rate goes up during Ramadan). For three months of labor, these women and children will earn \$120-\$150 each. Farmers sell the raw cotton for \$260-\$280/ton to a local ginnery. According to one small farmer with 31 hectares of land, youth only work for him after school or on weekends.

16. In agricultural Tajikistan, cotton is truly the fabric of their lives. Cotton and textile products contribute 20% of Tajik exports according to the Asian Development Bank, while cotton accounts for 10% of exports, and supports 75% of farm households on 250,000 hectares, according to the State Committee for Statistics. Tajikistan produces up to 550,000 tons of raw cotton each year, which after the ginning process winnows down to 150,000 tons of cotton fiber for export. Only 12-14% goes to Tajik textile manufacturers for processing in Tajikistan (reftel). Remaining cotton seeds are squeezed into cottonseed oil which lends a distinct flavor to the national dish "plov".

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